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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

11 July 1986

Syria: Troop Deployment in West Beirut [REDACTED]

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Summary

We believe the Syrians decided to send troops into West Beirut primarily to counter the growing presence of pro-Arafat Palestinian fighters in the city. The Syrian force, which we estimate to be between 300-600 soldiers [REDACTED] is not sufficient to impose or maintain security among factional militias in West Beirut. Damascus probably is prepared to increase the number of troops if necessary to counter Druze and Hizballah efforts to aid the Palestinians. Damascus also might expand its presence if a decision is made to expel Palestinian fighters from Beirut or to pressure the Christians in East Beirut at a later date. [REDACTED]

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Damascus wants to maintain a low profile to avoid provoking opposition from its allies and reduce the possibility of becoming directly involved in factional fighting. While we believe President Assad may see political advantages to playing an instrumental role in winning the release of US hostages at this time, we doubt that the issue is high on the Syrian agenda nor

This memorandum was prepared at the request of the NIO for Counterterrorism by [REDACTED] the Levant Branch, Arab-Israeli Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Information as of 11 July 1986 was used in its preparation. Questions and comments should be addressed to Chief, Arab-Israeli Division [REDACTED].

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[redacted]

do we expect the current Syrian troop deployment to increase prospects for their release. [redacted]

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Damascus has become increasingly alarmed this year by the growing presence of PLO fighters in Lebanon. President Assad is fearful that Arafat loyalists are forming alliances with Lebanese factions--some allied with Syria--that could undermine Syrian goals there. [redacted]

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[redacted]

Syrian leaders have been concerned for some time over the developing ties between the Arafat loyalists and the Iranian-backed radical Shia Hizballah. Syrian Vice President Khaddam also recently accused the Druze of aiding the PLO return to Beirut. Druze leader Walid Junblatt responded to the charges by pointing to the dissidents within the Shia Amal organization--Syria's principal ally in Lebanon--as guilty of abetting the Palestinian cause in Lebanon. In an effort to counter Syrian moves in Lebanon, President Gemayel is also in the incongruous position of attempting to establish a relationship with the Palestinians. [redacted]

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The Syrian deployment begun last weekend is designed to bottle up Palestinian fighters in their camps and prevent their resupply by Lebanese factions. Troop presence along the coastal road and control of the Khaldah junction is aimed at blocking infiltration of additional fighters and weapons from the Druze port at Khaldah. Syrian control of the airport road severely restricts the freedom of movement of Palestinians to and from the refugee camps of Sabra, Shatilla, and Burj al-Barajinah. [redacted]

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The other principal infiltration route for Palestinians returning to Lebanon is through Sidon. Vice President Khaddam has threatened to deploy troops as far south as Sidon, although Damascus is well aware it would require many more troops to move to Sidon and that Israel might not tolerate a Syrian military presence there. In any event, Israel is currently enforcing a naval blockade of the port at Sidon in its own effort to limit the return of Palestinians to the south. [redacted]

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[redacted]

Syria can quickly augment its current troop presence in the capital. Additional troops from the 35th or 41st Special Forces regiments located in the mountains east and northeast of Beirut could be brought in within a matter of hours. If necessary, troops from the one of the Special Forces regiments near Tripoli could be called upon, but the logistics of the move is more complicated. [redacted]

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Syrian forces do not want to become directly engaged in fighting Palestinians, nor does Damascus want Amal, its principal Lebanese ally, bogged down in fighting. Syrian leaders remember the inconclusive and costly results of the camp wars last summer between the PLO and Amal. Instead, Damascus hopes to intimidate the Druze and others involved in aiding the Palestinians, and dry up the PLO presence by cutting off their routes of resupply. [redacted]

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We do not anticipate that Damascus is prepared to commit more than another 600-800 troops to its current effort in Beirut. If Syria is unsuccessful in undermining the Palestinians, however, we believe Damascus would give serious consideration to more dramatic moves--including using its own troops--aimed at expelling Palestinian fighters from Beirut. Before 1982 Syria deployed about one brigade of troops in Beirut--about 4,000-5,000 men. [redacted]

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We do not believe that Syrian troops will enter East Beirut. Damascus has been reluctant to take on the Christians directly and is more likely to continue its policy of using its surrogates to keep up the pressure on the recalcitrant Christians. We expect Syrian efforts to reopen green line crossings between East and West Beirut to be limited for fear of sparking a violent Christian reaction that would increase the exposure of Syrian troops to terrorist retaliation. [redacted]

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In the longer run, however, if Syria can crush the Arafat presence in West Beirut, it could be tempted to use its presence there to pressure the Christians. Syrian forces could back up Lebanese surrogates fighting along the Green Line, for example.

Impact on the Hostages

The current Syrian deployment will--at best--have only a marginal impact on the US hostages. So far, Syrian troops appear to be patrolling many areas of West Beirut, but not those where we believe the hostages may be--that is areas controlled by Hizballah. We believe that Damascus does not know where the

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[redacted]

hostages are located, but Syria's presence in West Beirut could provide the means for Damascus to develop better information. We believe that conducting thorough searches for the hostages is beyond the capability of the current Syrian force. [redacted]

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Nevertheless, there is a slim possibility that Syrian patrols of West Beirut could have some positive effects. The presence of Syrian troops both in West Beirut and on the outskirts probably will have a psychological effect on the captors, causing them to lie low during the Syrian intervention. Patrols by Syrian troops will increase marginally the chances that hostages in transit between holding sites may be discovered; for this reason we believe that the captors are less likely to relocate the hostages. We believe, however, that the captors would move at least some of the hostages from sites in West Beirut that attracted the Syrian's attention, probably to the Bekaa Valley.

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Although confronting the Palestinians in West Beirut appears to be Damascus's primary purpose, the hostages probably figure in Assad's calculations to a minor extent. [redacted]

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[redacted]

If Syrian forces in Beirut discovered the hostages in transit, Damascus would return them after staging a major public relations event. Assad would welcome the opportunity to take credit for their release to counter statements that Syria supports terrorism. [redacted]

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[redacted]

We do not expect Syria to undertake a rescue mission. The fallout from a failure in which US hostages were killed would seriously damage Damascus's prestige, and Assad almost certainly believes that it would disrupt relations with Washington. [redacted]

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SUBJECT: Syria: Troop Deployment in West Beirut

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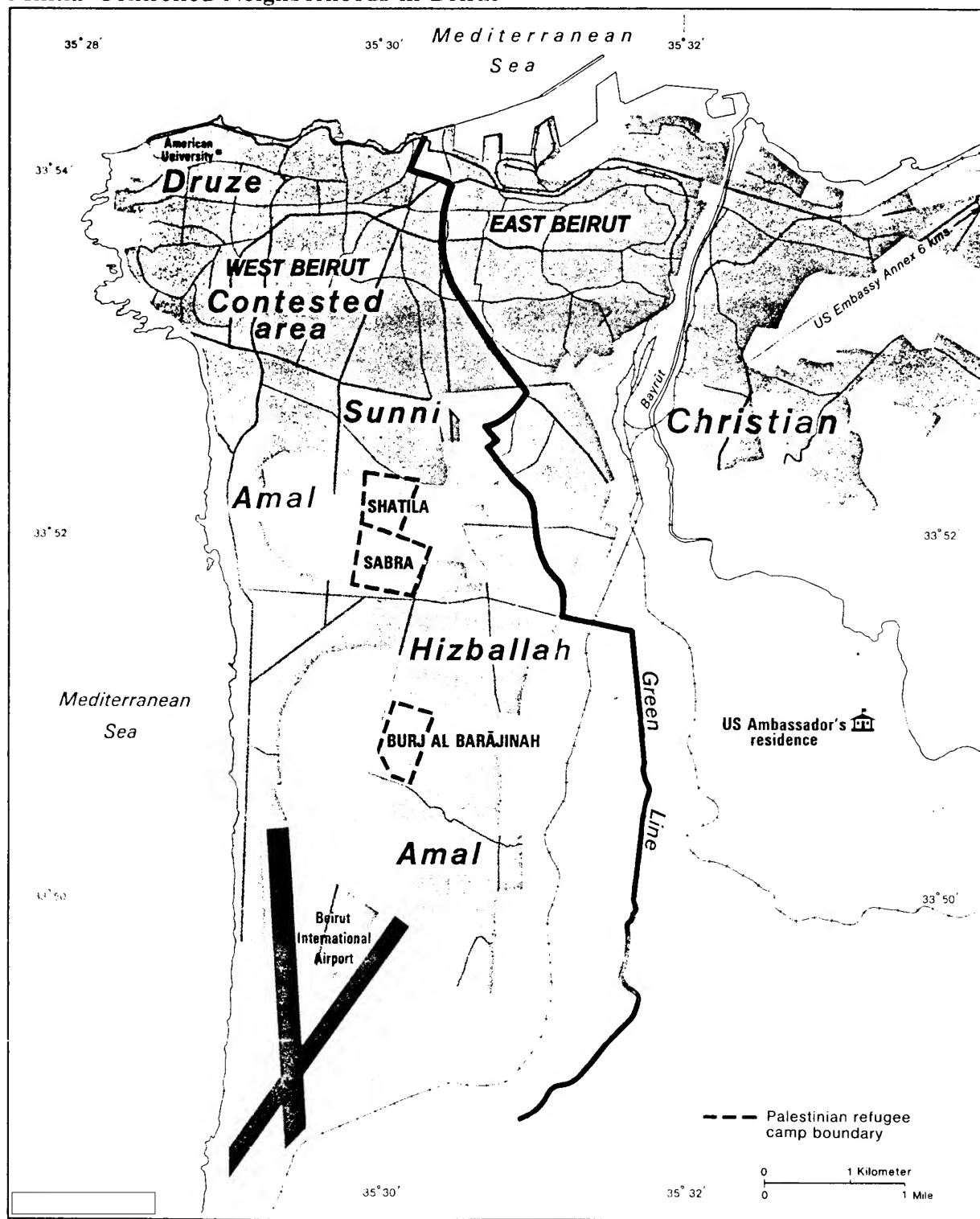
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Militia-Controlled Neighborhoods in Beirut



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